

# A Meeting in the Wilderness

**A**FTER the day's fishing the men were dispersing themselves according to their various tastes. The incorrigibly civilized were, in the cook's phrase, "slickin' up." Withers was picking at his banjo, and Lorimer was adding a few words concerning the day's catch to the diary which he religiously kept for his wife—they had not been married a year. The doctor, his back against a tree, legs stretched before him, smoked and watched the reflections of the sunset across the river as they touched a twisting creek with opalescence and gave a celestial shimmering beauty to the fresh green of the reeds. Hermann, his oldest friend, his hair shining and his face red from a recent plunge into the water basin, dropped upon the ground beside him and gave the scene the approval of a long survey as he filled his pipe.

Across the river the marshes and an upland stretch, with wooded patches, crept to the blue line of the hills. But on the camp side there was nothing but a narrow crescent of beach between the water and the gloom and mystery of unbroken rising forest.

"Not bad, eh, Todd?" said Hermann finally. The doctor nodded.

"Admit you've muffed it not coming up here before, I tell you, these two weeks each spring make a new man of me, make me able to go on with the grind in the city."

"Until July and Southampton," laughed the doctor. Then he added quietly, "It is a good place; I—I knew it before."

"What! And never come?"

"No." The monosyllabic was abrupt than even the taciturn doctor's usually were. After it he relaxed into a fit of musing undisturbed by Hermann's stare, until finally that gentleman forgot his surprise and the theme that had occasioned it. Then Todd spoke again.

"We came up here three seasons running, when we were boys," he said, "Walter and I, with the governor. That is, Walter was a boy of seventeen the last time—twelve years ago. I was older than I've ever been since—twenty-four and just out of the medical school. He knew how to give boys a good time, Hermann, our dad."

Hermann hid an amazed face in a cloud of smoke. When before had Todd ever spoken of Walter?

"Of course," he ventured after a minute, "you've never come upon any trace of him—of Walter?"

"No. It was that that killed the old man, Hermann. He was only fifty-eight when he died, and there was no earthly cause for it but just that one—brooding upon Walter."

"Young scoundrel!" growled Hermann.

"You don't understand," said the doctor quickly. "It—it was an ugly affair. Walter was only nineteen when it happened, and it wasn't his fault. You remember him, Hermann—the most impulsive, sensitive, high-spirited young fellow. You know the kind of pride he had—three parts youth and a conviction that the world was made for him. Well—it was a money mix-up—a nasty thing. He'd been pretty wild and idle and spend-thrift at college the year before, and the old man thought to sober him down by putting him to work in the office that summer. There was a big misappropriation, and Sears—father's old head clerk—proved it on him—on Walter. I don't know why I am talking like this, Hermann. God knows I never opened my lips about the affair before. I suppose it's the place, and remembering him as he was then—the gayest, the warmest-hearted boy, crazy over the woods."

Hermann, at the sudden break in his old friend's voice, developed an interest in the farthest ridge of hills across the river. By and by he growled out something that might be interpreted as "Go on."

"Walter took it—Lord! can't you see how he would take it, Hermann? You know boys' heroes. I think father's disbelief in him—not his anger—broke Walter's heart. And the promise flung at him,—that it would all be hushed up—that was the final blow. He walked out of the house. Father said, bitterly, 'Let him go,' and made no effort to get him back, to look for him—anything. I looked everywhere—couldn't find a trace. Then when Sears was found out—the thieving hound—we did try: all the regular channels—friends and college, and finally detectives. But no one knew—not even Christine Leland—they were rather sweet on each other, a sort of boy-and-girl chumship. I've always thought that was why she never married."

"Oh, you have, have you?" interjected Hermann. Dr. Todd nodded absently.

"Man alive half the town believes she's only waiting for you to ask her these ten years!" cried his friend.

"Half the town doesn't know Christine—or Walter," retorted the doctor, hotly. "Oh, well; I don't know why I

gabble on. I'm a garrulous old woman, Hermann."

"Come on to supper," growled Hermann, translating a babel of yells from the younger campers into a summons.

The sunset light had faded from the marshes and the camp-fire was painting the long, pale twilight of the North with ruddy color when a new sound added itself to the distant call of the falls above them, the whimper of the birds and the leaves, and the tinkle of Withers's banjo. It was the steady, interlocking crackle of an approach through the woods. Pierre, one of the guides arose and advanced cautiously. The men ceased their talk and raised their heads to listen. The noise came nearer, and nearer and, with a final burst of the detaining underbrush, a woman appeared on the edge of the camp.

In the golden rosy glow of the fire she was seen to be young, with the slim grace of youth and wildness; her uncovered head was a glorious tangle of ruddy darkness. Her eyes, gazing at them all with a look which was part fear, part defiance, seemed black. From her head swung an unlighted lantern.

"Is there—is there some one here who could help a sick man?" she quavered.

"Where?" asked Hermann as Dr. Todd pushed toward the front of the group.

"Back in the woods. In our cabin. It's about three miles."

"I didn't know there was a settlement anywhere in this district," said Hermann.

"There ain't. There's only our place. Will anybody come? He's hurt—he's broke his leg—he goes out with his head with the pain an' talks crazy. An' there's no one at home but me."

"How did you know we were here?" asked someone.

"They said down at Caribou Corners that Pierre had taken out a party of fishermen, an' Pierre always camps here. Will anybody come?" she asked, impatiently.

"I am a physician," said Dr. Todd; "I will go with you. Is there a good trail?"

"No trail at all, but I know the clearest way. Please come quick."

Hermann offered to accompany them, but the girl cried out in a fever of anxiety. "The more that comes the longer it will take," and Todd nodded his comprehension of her impatience. He ran into the tent, seized the case of instruments and remedies which long experience had taught him to make as invariable part of his outfit, and started with his guide.

They picked their way through the tangle of the woods, the lantern's little bar of light just before their feet throwing all the world beyond into deeper blackness. At first the doctor essayed to ask questions, but not only was the girl reticent but she led him along the ascent at a speed which left no breath for conversation. He only learned that it was not one of her own family whom he was called upon to aid. Yet he gained an impression of her tense and passionate interest in the patient.

They came by and by to a clearing with the square of a cabin bulked darkly in it. Through the window cut in the logs and through the cracks in the door a ruddy light gleamed. She the door a ruddy light gleamed. She found himself in a spacious square room. At one end a fire glowed in the great fireplace of unchiseled stones. The walls were of rounded logs, striped of their bark, their interstices filled with the same gray cement that held the chimney-stones together. There were many-antlered trophies of the hunt on the walls; fishing-rods and rifles were stretched between hooks fastened into the logs or on shelves; bright household utensils glittered near the fireplace. A table, shining with red oilcloth, was drawn against outside of the room. It held a lighted lamp, the rays of which fell upon a cot on the opposite side. On this the patient lay.

Dr. Todd stepped quickly toward it, with professional cheer in his voice and words. He saw a long, stalwart figure—a young face, pale through its brown with the pallor of pain, its lips compressed beneath its brown beard. A pair of frank blue eyes, that seemed to contain all the brilliant sapphire of the northern skies and lakes in their depths, stared up at him. He drew his hands across his own eyes as though to brush away a mist. The man on the cot half rose upon an elbow. The clenched lips fell open.

"Walter!"

"Jim!"

The girl came close to the cot as the brothers recognized each other. She stared savagely at the man she had brought to the cabin. Her dark eyes blazed, her bosom heaved, her lips grew white with emotion.

"The first thing is to see to that leg of yours, old man," said the doctor, when their hands unclasped. He turned to the girl and bespoke her assistance. The tension of her dread relaxed. She obeyed his instructions

as swiftly, as silently, as deftly, as one of the nurses in the great hospital, whose chief pride he was, could have done. Beneath their combined skill the makeshifts of the wilderness were transformed into instruments of healing. The broken leg was set. Walter came gradually from under the influence of the anesthetic which had deadened him to pain, and the brothers looked again, long and affectionately, at each other.

"Dulcie," said Walter, gently, to the girl beside the fireplace, again a figure of antagonism, "this is my brother, whom I have not seen for—ten years."

"I will go into the other room." She answered the unspoken request with instant docility, and went closing the door behind her.

"Who is she, Walter?" The doctor's voice was stern.

"Dulcie! She's the daughter of the people who live here—the Fergusons. He's a Scotchman—a silent, sour old fellow. I fancy he had his reasons for taking to the woods—like most of us."

"Don't—Walter," begged his brother. "I came up here to-day to see the old man on business. But he and Marm Ferguson were both gone in to Caribou Corners. It was as I started to leave—they didn't show up and I couldn't stay alone with her—that I accomplished this," he nodded toward his bandaged leg. "It's all right, Jim, I've known her since she was a little thing. It was the Fergusons took me in when—when I came away. Now tell me everything about—home."

His voice crossed the word with indescribable affection.

Jim told his story brokenly; repeating, dwelling upon all that could soothe his brother. Finally he was through.

"Now you talk," he said. "Where have you been? What have you done? How have you lived?"

Walter then laughed boyishly. "I've fished and I've hunted. I've been lumberman and guide. And now I've a shack of my own—built it myself. It beats this hollow, and this is a good deal of a mansion. I can tell you. Mine is down on Lake Meddyconeg—you don't know where that is, of course. And I experiment a little in sub-artic agriculture."

"Walter—the doctor's voice was full of tenderness—" do you know what's waiting for you at home? A decent little fortune, a decent place in the world, a lonely brother, and—you have not forgotten Christine?"

"Forgotten Christine? Hardly!" cried the patient emphatically.

"She has never married. She—you remember how fine and gay and sincere she was?"

"Christine was a bully good fellow."

"She's just the same—just as glib, just as whimsically merry and—her mind and her heart are the biggest. She runs a kindergarten settlement place; but she's no sentimentalist! Just a big-souled woman."

"Jim, why haven't you—you're the only fellow that ever could be worthy of her," stammered Walter.

"I should have tried," replied his brother, simply, "but I always thought—"

(Continued on Page 7.)

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